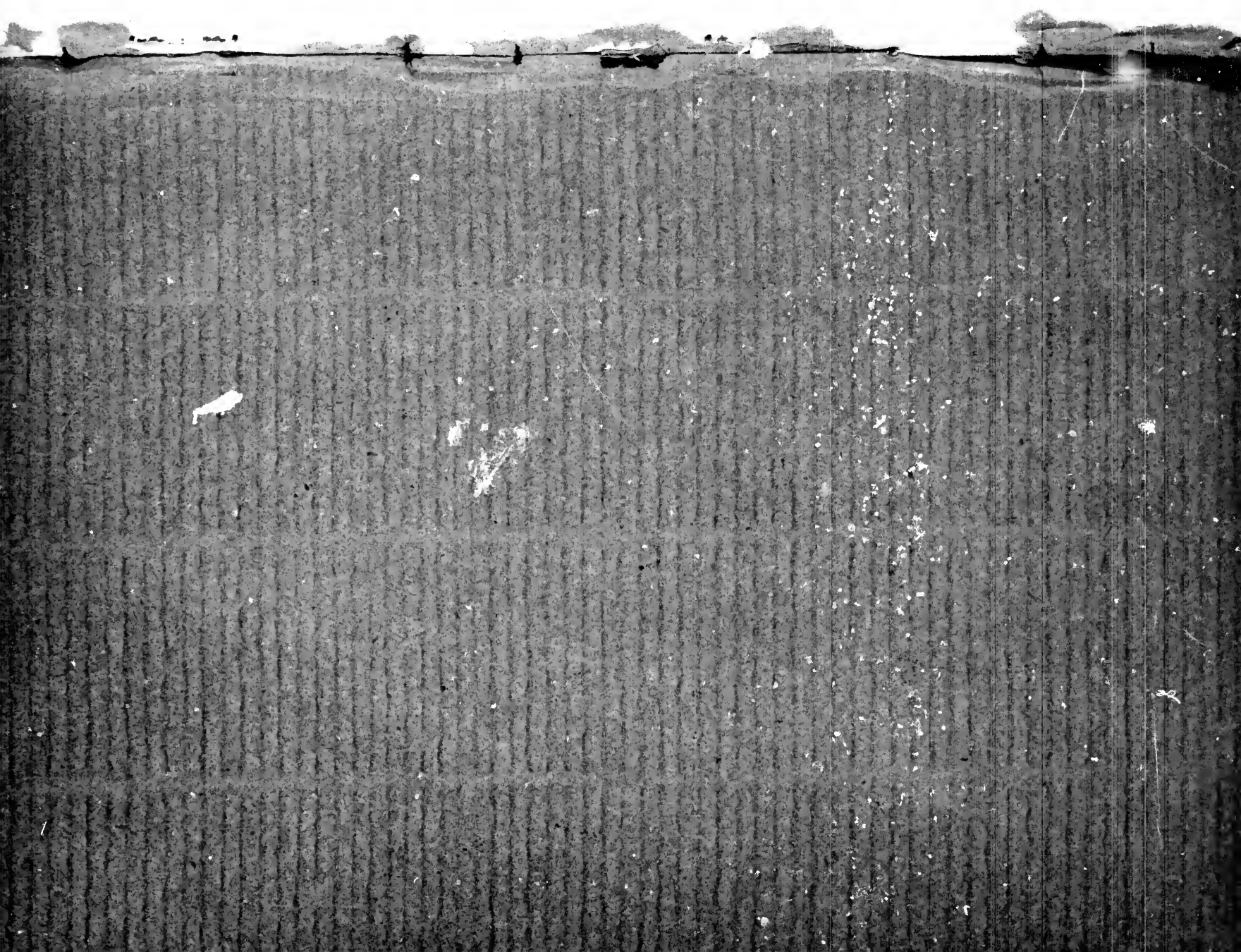
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The Rock or The Rye

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THE ROCK OR THE RYE

AN UNDERSTUDY.

AFTER "THE QUICK OR THE DEAD."

BY

T. C. DeLEON,

AUTHOR OF "CROSS PURPOSES," "HAMLET, YE DISMAL PRINCE,"
"FOUR YEARS IN REBEL CAPITALS," ETC.

"WORDS ARE—WHAT?"—JOCINFERIA.

TORONTO:
THE NATIONAL PUBLISHING COMPANY.
1888

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PREFACE

TO THE NINTH EDITION.

If it be true that a book without preface is like a salad without salt, it is certain that too much salt spoils a small salad. But it is not certain that the trivial matter comprised in the pages that follow rises to the importance of a real book. Still, its immediate and flattering reception by press and public, so continued as to force nine editions, may be reason to rehearse briefly the motive and origin of this travestie. Written wholly as a jest, for limited private circulation, with remote idea of making neither an echo nor a book, the local demand, quickly supplemented by calls upon the publishers from distant sections, surprised no one more than the author. But in all editions mechanical features alone were changed, no word of the text having been altered since its hasty penning.

The *brochure* went forth unsigned until very many reasons, varying in every thing save unanimity of error, had been assigned for its existence by the reviewers. Among them were the anonymous parodist's personal spite against the brilliant young authoress; personal pique to revenge on Virginia and

all Virginians; that he (or she) was Miss Rives' beaten rival in similar fields; and even that Mobile had some grudge to wreak upon her gifted foster-daughter.

Amid the crazy-quilt guess-work was a long and elaborate analysis of motives, from a source important enough to demand a reply; and, as a fact is ever more potent than argument, some extracts are appended from the answer, published on the 17th of May last:

"It is therefore proper to state that I wrote the parody; —*currente calamo* (as even a careless glance must show), immediately on reading the original, and before any of the vicious and scurrilous critiques had appeared. Any criticism of the brochure must show it to be aimed at the verbal mannerisms and overstrained situations of 'The Quick or the Dead;' not in any sense at the author, as deducted by your long discussion of imagined cause and effect.

"A book printed for the public is public property always; however questionable may be the taste of peering behind it into the real or imagined private life of its maker.

"To dispose of your theory, that any 'strained' relations exist in this case between author and parodist, I may quote from a letter I received within the week. This letter, certainly not meant for publicity in any form, begins:

"'Thank you so very, very much for your cordial letter and for the copies of the 'Rock or the Rye,' and it is signed 'I am your sincere friend, Amelia Rives.'

"Two other sentences in the same letter are gentle and generous enough to entirely dispose of your theory that Miss

Rives dislikes Mobile or Mobilians, or that either have any sort of grudge to wreak upon her. Alluding to some of her critics, she says: 'I have come to the conclusion that the strongest trees are sometimes rooted in mud, which can not blacken their fair blossoms. There are our dear Magnolias on the Shell Road, for instance.' And again, 'I will always have the tenderest feelings for the pretty, old town, with its beautiful bay, and its people, so warm hearted to others.'

"No one who knows the noble, fearless nature of the young author (and her earlier works have taught all intelligent readers to understand it) can conceive her writing thus of a city that had for her unpleasant memories of any kind.

"Simply giving my name as author of this careless skit disposes of your other theory that spite against Virginia influenced its writing. If your critic be not too young in literature he can recall that the dedication of my pioneer volume of 'South Songs' proclaimed my estimate of the women of that grand old State; that my editorial life of a quarter century has given (here and elsewhere) unvaryingly just tribute to her men; that my 'Four Years in Rebel Capitals,' and my 'Soldiers' Souvenir' have emphasized the same for both.

"'The Rock or the Rye' went forth unsigned, as no important work in which I had pride of authorship, but as carelessly dashed off criticism of work I deemed unworthy of an already noted and acknowledged author.

"While the parody is a literary nothing, the motive that induced it need not be misrepresented. Neither need my sincere belief that a maturer style (purified by passage of the furnace) will yet bear worthily the fruits of a genius

exceptional in a writer so young and, hitherto, so unschooled in the rough university of letters.

"Very respectfully,

T. C. DeLeon."

It seems proper to add that the author of the deductions, thus answered, frankly and promptly admitted the error into which the anonoymous had led him; but in the next (the fifth) edition the author's name went upon the cover and the title-page.

A paragraph still goes the rounds of the press to the effect that Miss Rives wrote to thank the parodist for writing "The Rock or the Rye." Did such absurdity need disproof, it could be found in her generous words quoted above.

It had been this writer's privilege to know the authoress of "The Quick or the Dead" years before the public had claimed her, and to discuss many of the crude fruits of a genius which has since developed so rapidly. It is still pleasant to know that his flippant imitation has been misinterpreted neither by her nor by the "sober second thought" of the critics who have discussed

THE AUTHOR.

MOBILE, ALA., July 30, 1888.

THE ROCK OR THE RYE.

I.

There was a yawping wind a-howl that night, with no mist to moisten it; yet it cringed and whimpered, snored and was hushed incessantly, as though wet to its skin with a blizzard.

Agamemna was deucedly cut up by her beauless walk from the grocery, and from finding thereat no letter from Rye; for she had expected him to write, remittingly.

In the jim-jam lightning she saw her own profile clear cut athwart the suave and complaisant sky, like acids on litmus paper; and the dry, whitey-mauve sand swirled clutchingly about her massive feet in that wetless wind.

And after what thundrous fashion those feet pounded warmbathward!

They hurled through narrow cow paths like a girl's from St. Louis; spanned over great holes, whose

bottoms seemed rushing up to gree 'hem ; spurned huge boulders, as if they had been m re acorns !

Just a turn of the path, shadowing moon-mistly, rose the little one-horse drug-cabin, so familiar to Agamemna's childhood's post-peanutty cramps. How implicitly she believed the beautiful legend of its name. The negroes said it had been built by a tramp doctor, who had toted his physic in tin buckets ; hence the name, a-pot-he-carry !

This touching legend rose soulfully to her, even in this wetless windsomeness of a night whose scurrying lightnings swirled great boles from the armless trees.

Her good Aunt Fizzigig met her at the cottage door and told her tea was cold ; but she replied that she had had a drop at the grocery ; hung her wind-worried hat on the wide hat-rack standing arm-loosely, and passed to her own room. There she found her little maid, Jerusha Matilda ; Ajax, as Agamemna called her because her color defied the lightning, The little black occupied the sole easy chair, fast asleep before the fire ; one curled-ebony foot, with its hickory-nut colored lining, propped unsteadily upon the great toe of the other.

That great toe went through Agamemna like a knife !

How Rye used to laugh at it ! She put both

hands in her pockets and great gusts of anguished shake swept through her palsing entity; rending it with gaspous shiverings to the inmost recesses of her soulfulness, as a simoon of regret sweeps the sand-surges of sorrow, leaving only an agonized—dull—dry—arid waste! For the pockets are empty; and Rye—he, the one sole and responsible husband of Agamemna's brief married life!—*he* had not remitted.

In the agonized daze of that staggerous impact, the stricken girl half reeled and caught at the edge of the mantel shelf. Suddenly she released it and chasseed back with a wild, weird welkin-ringy shriek that shot Ajax straight out of her chair, spinning round on the memorous great toe, widewakened!

How Triteness doth elbow-jostle Truism! It is the direct *Meum* of the most irrelevant *Tuum!* The inspirator of Agamemna's resonant yell was nothing more viperous than a half-smoked cheroot, lying ash-encumbered on the little brass tray, just as the man who had been smoking left it, three long months before.*

Her eyes still fascinate-riveted upon her new find, Agamemna gave arm-sweep superb towards the portal.

*It is the habit, in some Virginian households, to dust the mantels once in two months; but, apparently, not in all of them.

"Git!" she hissed in a stage whisper behind her set teeth and from under her bitten tongue; and Ajax slid from the room into the dark hall beyond, like a guilty spirit through the back gates of Hades into the blackness of Acheron's pit. Then, with panther-spring, Agamemna swirled her lissom strength against the door, slid the rusty bolt, then turned and threw herself wildly upon the remnant of her native Virginian weed.

Kicking off both massive shoes, with one single impulse of her shapely femoral muscles, she sunk upon the hearthrug, stretching the wool-stockinged feet to the genial blaze, thus screening her entire person. The carbuncle waves of her glorious hair had rippled down from their fastenings, folding her white throat in a ruddy glow, as of spun fire. With impatient sweep of those gleaming, strong arms she clutched and twisted the shimmering masses, that writhed through her fingers like bloody serpents, and jerked them into a crowning crimson coronet, above her fair, broad brow. Then she showered frantic kisses upon the dry end of the cigar stump; shivering pitiful the while, and torn with short, gaspy little giggles, like a schoolgirl with her first mash.

Then she lit it with a lightwood knot, and began to smoke in a passion of short, quick puffs—breathless —*noiseless*—TERRIBLE!



SHE CLUTCHED AND TWISTED THE SHIMMERING MASSES, THAT WRITHED THROUGH HER FINGERS LIKE BLOODY SERPENTS.—*Page 4.*

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None of this will seem overstrained, to one who has had the jim-jams.

In this very room Agamemna Comefret had passed three weary months of absolutely married life. Three months ago her husband had had a dangerous attack of the monkeys, complicating his left liver; the doctors had ordered perfect rest and change of scene; so he had left his wife and gone to the New Orleans races. Moreover, he had left her as utterly impecunious a grass widow as ever longed for companionship, amid the scenes of her pre-marital happiness.

She smoked on, in quick, regretful puffs. As she smoke she watched the little wreaths spiralling through air, as evanescent as her hopes for the postal-draft that evening; and their points seem to stab her happiness corkscrewly. Then, suddenly, memory—or something—seemed to strike her a foul, below the belt. Sounds sounded in her ears. The fire danced and leaped and kicked up; the splitting coals took on her husband's face, wrinkled into fiendish grimaces. The room reeled round in a mad witches' dance; the sound at her ear, now dinning into it with thunder tones, was Rye's voice!

She had not, however, calculated the full potency of the grief that was about to claim her. As vanished pains again shot across her inner diaphragmatic consciousness, there came with them shivers

and qualms and chills unimagined. She rose to heavy feet; they trembled beneath her as the mad carmagnole of the furniture whirled faster and more zig-zagly. The voice at her ear roared now. It stamped and rollicked over her agonized tympana. She could hear the very words; reckless, rummy, passionate words, not meant for a gent to utter :—

"Aga!—Agamemna!—Your uncurled hair is a grape-vine and your breath is a cocktail! You make me——drunk!—*Hic!*——*hoo*—ray!"

In mighty, wild-surging pain the girl staggered to the door, launching her 200 pounds against it, with frantic screams :—

"Fire! Murder! Thieves! Set 'em up again!"

Up the hall flew Ajax and Aunt Fizzigig, finding Agememna prone upon her back; the perfect hands clinched in the rubrant masses of coronetted curls; the plus-perfect feet wildly kicking at nothings in the air. When they had laid her on the bed, Miss Fizzigig dipt a long, lean hand into a deep pocket and drew forth a quaint quart flask; forcing its thin neck between the girl's indrawn lips.

With a great gulp Agamemna opened her tortured eyes,—closed them quickly and took several short, difficult swallows. Then she winked her left and muttered :—

"I'm O. K.!—Keno!"—and tried to turn over. A terrible shivering shook her from bang to pannier;

with a pitiful moan, she fixed her left hand in Ajax's wool, pulling for life as she panted :—

"Help me !—quick—cuspidor—*ah !*——"

* * * * * * *

II.

Jimsonweed was a typical old Virginia home.

Mid-October in Eden could not have been nearly as perfect as mid-October at Jimsonweed. It is damper in Eden, and consequently more unhealthy.

Through one of those *plus quam* Eden twilights, Agamemna loped lazily homeward, on the back of her favorite Broncho, imported for her direct from Siam by her overindulgent Aunt Fizzigig.* She was appropriately dressed in a bright red polo shirt, a pair of Rye's corduroy hunting pants and most suggestively swell tan stockings thrust into red morrocco boots. Her glorious noon-sun crown of curling locks swirled about her slant shoulders in a glint of dazzling tone ; while the almost too rich perfume from them, born of Pear's soap and natural oil, floated out behind, yard wide and almost visible. Amid the jingly dancing masses of these hyper-ambrosial curls, the little scarlet polo hat seemed a dingy speck of brown.

*There is no need to name the Aunt here; but she gets her whack in so seldom in this story, that it seems only a fair shake to lead her in sometimes by the ear.

It was Agamemna's fad to avoid the side-saddle. Her feet fell profoundly on either side of her steed; thus securely balancing her. And she sang as she homeward rode; sang a song that her husband loved, in a rich West India fruity voice—not a mellow voice, but a trifle overripe. And the words were these:—

"Bound to run all night—
"Bound to run all day!
"Some bet dere money on de bob-tail nag,
"But I bet mine on de gray!"

The horse had galloped to the door; the strong hand had pulled him nearly to his haunches; one fascinating stocking had fitfulled over his ears with the sough of summer lightning; and Agamemna had landed both feet on the grass, ere she beheld a man, standing on the low step.

One wild-eyed flash of lightning eye; one stifled cry,—

"Oh! Rye! Rye! You've hit 'em at last!"—and she launched herself catapultly against his vest.

He was a strong man, with two firm calves and one bull neck; so he braced himself and only breathed a little hard.

"Come off!" he said good naturedly—"You see, I'm not Rye, only Rock.—Now, don't mind it like that! *I* don't, 'pon honah!"

The Tyrian dyes in the kaleidoscopic imagery

upon the dorsality of the dolphin *in articulo mortis*, were never so brilliant varihuey as the tints that chased each other over the girlly cheeks of the misdirected wife! In their encrimsoning reflections, glowing sunsetly, even her massed curls seemed a shade less wildly rubrant than before.

"Oh! what *must* you think of me!" she semi-sobbed with great shoulder-humps, burying her flamy face in the flowing mane of a Siberian St. Bernard bloodhound, that came up and fawned upon her—"what *do* you think?"

"Oh! you're all solid," Rock replied convincingly.

She looked up glowing. "I should smile!" she answered. "Feel my biceps;" and in the prideful purity of her strength she stripped her white arm to the shoulder and lunged it at him. He stopped her cleverly; then felt her muscle.

"*Well!* You are a masher," he said. "Don't mind my slang, you know. I belong to the Manhattan, and all club men do it."

"That's all regular," she answered with sweet dignity, "so long as it isn't wormy chestnutty.—But say, you're awfully like Rye; even your voice and the way you hug a girl."

"Yes; we are twin cousins, you know," the young man answered. "And the singular part of it is that I feel everything he does. You have never kissed

Rye, but my lips puckered ; I never smoke too much, but he gets nervous."

"How terrible ! How uncanny," murmured Agamemna, limb-swept by one of her most shuddery shiverings. "It is like being possessed !"

"Yes, by two of us," Rock answered gloomily. "But, say, you remember the first spat you had with Rye? The time you bit the piece out of his ear?—Well, look here !"

The gums of a yellow-ochre breeze were just beginning to cut themselves into the teeth of a brown gale, against the umber edges of a distant wood ; and the violet reflection set all the dusk aglow. Agamemna looked up and lo ! the large, pink ear lobe he turned to her, was indentated crescently ; serrated to the very irregularities of those perilous pearls, through which she now panted breath-catchy.

"This *is* wonderful !" she gasped. "But you are *not* my husband !"

"Not quite ; but the next best thing, Aggy !"

They looked at each other in the dimming violet haze ; a long, deep looky gaze. The woman spoke first. What *could* she have said but this :—

"What does it matter? Let us give each other our red-hot thoughts."*

"I will give you one white-hot now. I love you !"

*Literal quotation from a recent novel.



AJAX HAD A PRETTY TRICK OF WAKING HER MISTRESS.—*Page 13.*

She put her ungloved hand in his; their full pulses throbbed into one. They drew ragged, but hemstiched, breaths together. He passed his strong arms about her and lifted her 14 stone 10, till her feet hung, limp but massive, a foot from the ground. She smiled witchly in the yellow gums of the adolescent brown gale. She felt it would be like this, if she had gone to visit her husband at the grand stand; and he had come up and sat on the edge and showed her pool tickets, and every one a winner!

Suddenly she writhed and shook with a spasmodic tremor that rattled her rosy hair like leaves of an autumn forest. She panted and clung to him chestly, as she murmured from her boots:—

"Oh! Rock, you are really, truly my husband's double. Agony! O! Agony! should *either* of you die, I never *could* be a widow! It is pitiful—monstrous; but it is true;—you and he and I are one!" And the gust wind of passion bent and swayed the woman's whole being, as it would rend her.

"Yes; Rock and Rye are one," the man said gloomly, holding her a little closer, if possible. "It is the hand of Fate; but we must work the new rule of three!"

It was blessed for Agamemna that her nose was digging into his vest and she could not see the smile he smole, as he spoke. Rather it was a grin

he grule. The lips, thin and drawn, curled up to the eyebrows; the eyebrows down-curved, lapped the lips; while the chin and nose sharpened and snapped together. Then he added: "We *are one;* and *he* must be backing every d—d looser at Orleans, for *I'm* busted flatter than Ingalls!"

At that word, Agamemna gave no sound. She only grew cold—cold! She didn't even shiver; she only limped.

The bare, beautiful, blonde arms slid slowly down the man's shoulders; down past his broad hips and well muscled thighs; down past his shapely knees, even to his slim ancles!—She shut up upon her own being pocket-telescopely; huddled a cold, clammy mass of faint and hair and tan stockings at her husband's double's feet.

III.

Rockfort Cheesley came to Jimsonweed the next day and the next seventeen weeks; but he never saw Agamemna. In all those days she never left her bed; subsisting only on chocolate caramels and milk-punch; sending Ajax to the grocery, after a telegram from Rye, every 19 minutes by the old cupboard clock.

What æons of ages the double girl-wife lived semi-slumbery, in that stupor of the soul! Tons pressed

down the motor-springs of thought, deadening the unborn intent, ere yet it blinked its off eye in the dawning glimmer of a possible To Be! It was not the milk-punch that was the only deadener, as Miss Fizzigig thought. The spinster deemed it somesortwardly due to ultra saccarnization super-imposed upon the cream-alcoholoids by constant caramelismistic pressure.

But far down in the depths of her racked and doubt-tormented sub-soul, Agamemna knew that neither the spirit nor the comfit tore her thus into card-wool of dissevered and dissonant-jarred entities. Oh! that one long night, made up of hundreds of daylight hours and moonless ages, cemented frostly by quick-congelating doubts!

She fluttered, like a tortured gnat, between the wide-spread horns of the beefy bullock of dilemma. She was Mahomet-coffinal, in suspension-vibratorai between Rock and Rye!

One quiet, noony hour, when the leaf-breathings of the slumbrous oaks scarce fanned the dryad-cheeks in the shadow boles at their feet, Ajax crept into her mistress' chamber. Agamemna slept deeply; a quaint, deep goblet—cream-encrusted and spoon-scarred about its rim,—standing empty on the *or molu* ètagére by the bedside.

Ajax had a pretty trick of waking her mistress by gentle breathings into the dimples of her pon-

derous, but perfect ancles. This time the little black breathed until she grew giddy and would have grown blacker, had not pigmented prismal combinations forbid the phenomenon.

Slowly the roseleaf lids, heavy with sorrow—or something—revealed the dawn of those Aurora-ed eyes; and Agamemna saw—propped upon her dimpled knees—the longed for telegram. With lightning flashy zig-zags of her perfectly manicured nails, she tore it open and, hungry-eyedly, gulped its scribbled contents. Even undigested, they were enough :—

"Mrs. Agamemna Comefret, *Jimsonweed, Forkear Co.*

"Pumped again! The Bard lost and Chouser fell at the hurdle. Plumb busted—left liver gone—can't get home.

"Ryland."

The words burned into the girl's tortured eyeballs, deeper than Jove's lambent ire ever seared into cosmic bowels Hugh, gaspy heaves of breath sibilated through the hard clenched pearls, indented plainly through the drawn non-rubyrous lips. Shivery sighs tremored her bulbous throat, forcing the pharynx down upon the larynx; tossing the billowy bosom, that shook its light lace from snow-shaming contours, in waves of stormy nudity!

Suddenly the dimpled knees spasmodicked to the chin; the massive feet—toe-tipped shrimp-pinky as a Naiad's—shot the comforter corner-rooomly; and,



THEN SHE LAY LIMP IN THE STRONG ENCOMPASSMENT OF BICEPS AND FLEXOR.—*Page 16.*

with a single bound, Agamemna stood in mid-floor. Barekneed and cardinal crowned with luxuriance of curl, she flew Atalantaly down the dusty hall ; pausing before a huge old oaken chest, iron bound.

One spurnful thunder of her grand pedal ! The locked lid flew back, with malicious, baggage-smasherous swirl.

Stooping her sleek, white back and scooping her nudity of arms, Agamemna gathered the mass of old clothes to the ivoriness of her bosom ; then fled to her room and fell prone upon the bed, chilled to her marrow, fevered—palpitating—shiverous !

Ten minutes later she was on the sloping, treacherous, sleet-covered lawn, playing tennis witn Ajax. She had delightfully decorated the little black ; having a keen eye for color and exquisite sense of harmony in music and horseflesh. The child revelled in a short and shrunken sacque of bright orange flannel ; around her waist a broad swathe of crimson calico, the ends flapping around the burnt umber legs that marked the snow like high notes on a page of the "Witches' dance." On her head was the gray-black slouch hat, in which Agamemna's grand uncle had ridden to Gettysburg ; and the brilliant girl with absolute fevor for the game, had added three ostrich plumes and embroidered the motto—"*Ich dien,*" (I serve).

In retro-ratiocination, rather than by glancing be-

hind her, Agamemna felt more than saw, a noble man form resting against the rich verdure of a mid-summer oak.

He caught the boomerangy ricochet of her thought upon the wicket of his tennis-latticed soul, as from its depth he groaned :—

"Ah, there!"

"Stay there!" promptly girl-cried the deserted wife, now forgetful of all her woes and basking in the rayful warmth of a beatitudic To Come.

"*Stay* there!" she repeated, with ringing merriment in the voice—"until I say,—*Come!*"

And the grand creature—her clinging tennis suit of flamey colored jersey setting off the divine swell of figure, wax-workly—whirled swiftly round and glinted upon him a wondrous-woven wink of soul-most meaning.

A second more and his fringeful lip was imminent to her upturned rubies, as he whispered :—

"May I—*darling, May* I—*serve!*"

An earthquakic, spasmic shiver shuddered her from toe-tip to bang. Then she lay limp in the strong encompasment of biceps and flexor, and panted :—

"*Fifteen*—love!"—

And the four lips clung into a kiss.

IV.

Agamemna slept all night wide-eyed with gusty fitfulness, embroidered in arabesque night-mares of gray monotone. Gradually she wakened fully at gray dawn, to find Ajax breathing heavily upon ber ancles. Having accomplished that, the eerie black-amidget held out a note, written on the back of a telegraph blank. It was a well-known hand; and Agamemna's heart grasped it ere her sensuous fingers had clutched the paper. He wrote:—

"I'm off for N. Y. next train. Big dinner at the club. *Must* go and bombard pictures with jam tarts. Besides you won't divorce Rye and run off with me. Send a lock of your glorious hair. It will warm me upon the Pullman.

"R C"

The eyes Agememna turned up at Ajax were heavy with sleep and disgust.

"Hand me my type-writer," she said. "Consarn it! move live; can't you?"

Then she ticked out, with running accompaniment of shiverings, gasping and howlings, this reply:—

"O. K. We'd best not meet again. Can't consent to divorce, unless your luck changes. Farewell for ever.

"AGA."

"P. S. On second thought I'll drive you to the train."

"P. P. S. Come to lunch."

So, that noble self-immolative nature nerved itself in heroismic strength to harness the Siamese Broncho to the dog-cart, white-handily, while Rock smoked his post-prandial cigarette in the hammock.

Then, as they jolted over roots twistwise serpentine across the red roads, Agamemna's hand listlessly fell into the pocket of Rock's short sacque coat. A vast, thrillious tremor shook the man from heel to brow. He grew dizzy, closed his eyes and leaned back so far that the dog-cart tilted and the shafts lifted the pony high in the air. Then his voice rang through the woods, sonorous, horse-laughy :—

"Keep it there !—Ah !—don't move it !" he murmured brokenly. "Oh darling !—the delight !—the novelty ! It's the first time I have had anything in any pocket for a month !"

With blood-gushing surge of tint that stained brow, cheek, neck and, perhaps, bosom boiled-crably, Agamemna withdrew her hand.

"Emptiness !" she muttered withbitter emphasis behind her pharynx, "emptiness everywhere ! Oh heaven ! deem me not rebellious, but why—Oh ! why this full, o'erflowing plethora of vacua !"—and, whipping up her steed, the girl-widowed grass-wife dropped her hand back into the pocket, while huge, aqueous pearls rolled down the oval of her jaw, sea-saltly.



CLOSED HIS EYES AND LEANED BACK SO FAR THAT THE DOG CART TILTED, AND THE SHAFTS LIFTED THE PONY HIGH IN THE AIR.—*Page 18.*

The station reached, just as the fast mail rushed by at 4 miles an hour, Rock sprang from the trap to the rear platform, shook his light valise in farewell; with his haolloed "Tra-la-la!" bounding back from her overstrained intensity like ball from wicket. Unable to think, Agamemna picked up a young neighbor of the horse-shoeing persuasion, clad in red-flannel shirt, analine yellow hair and leathern apron. Driving him homeward, she overflowed her numbning regrets in a spring-freshet of talk on theosophy, rat-baiting, local anæsthesia, and the Sanscrit novel in the last magazine.

But all that night she was wind-shaken by gusty sighs that seemed to lift her very soles. Torn by half-gasps, she reeled till the high-canopied bed creaked in harmony to the agonized octaves of her discordant brain! Hideous sounds seemed to howl around her; hidous sights pierced through her closed lids and seared her sense; shapeless forms mocked her wide-eyed aching, as they floated by processional!

"Am I going mad?" she moaned, kicking the bolster into the corner—"*Am* I losing my little wits, because Rye cannot strike the winner? Oh, Rye! Rye! win for me! win for me!—Oh! Lord, *let* him hit the favorite,—just once!"

She burrowed her nose in the bedpost and tried to pray. She *could not!* Vast waves of passionate

poverty washed all the dye out of her words. "God's imagined face took on a horrible grinning."*

The little angels†, "loafing around the Throne," seemed buying losing pool-tickets on the next flying-match of 100 yards. Nothing seemed honest,—nothing seemed sober, all had the jim-jams, herself included.

With a slim glide of her lissom limbs, Agamemna squirmed from her bed, landing single-springly in mid-floor. Shaking her grand head, the golden hairpins in her coiled fleece of fire swirled round her in a glistening shower, gemming the dusty floor as stars in an urbane storm-sky! One more twist of the strong limbs and her wrapper left the shining satin of skin, as she stood Godivaly in the spun filament of her red-gold capillam!

One wave of the grand right arm—one sweep of the strong left, and the North and South windows flew awide!

A mist-veil of hail was fleecing down, sleeting aslant the cold face of Midnight. It smiled at the tickling breath of the Southwind, low whispering of the mountain tops, whence it escaped from its cradle, half-gale-born! Through the soft flakes peered

*The author reluctantly confesses that this reverently beautiful image is not original. He hates to do it, but he must. It was written by a poor old man named Hugo, thus:—*Et le bon Dieu, dans son caractere de vieux philosophe, sourit.*"

†This poetic sentiment is also a grab, but from nearer home. It was evaporated by a once-green American poet, who is still Hay.

curious optics of stars, blinking to take in beauties she should have unveiled only to the Moon, had almanacic incongruities served the Queen of Night.

And thus—clothed on with airiness, the girl sunk on her knees by the bed, with low, wailing wind-sob of moan,—canine in its pitiful depth of pain, far—far beyond the reach of ginger!

The flecked fleece flew in either window on the strong draught, whirling an aureole at meeting, just over the red, glory-crowned head; then softly shifting down upon the shining shoulders,—thence to the floor carded-woolly. The breath of the wind-god blew colder from the South by sou-norwest. The flakes grew larger and more unmeltuously solid. Still they fell upon the slant-sloping shoulders, glanced to the floor, rose ancleward up to the dimpled knee!

Agamemna reeked not of them. Chilled to the very marrow of her soul's bones, she still pondered upon her own inclement future, undiverted by trifles light as summery snow flakes.

* * * * * * * * *

Next morning, at gray dawn, Sarah—a shrivelled African, full of sympathy, muscle and apple toddy—prepared her mistress' bath of attar of roses, diluted with a teacup of warm water.

Where was that mistress?

Sarah dug her out of a six-foot drift with the fire shovel, warming her with embraceful sympathy and a hot Scotch.

V.

Some days after, Agamemna was reading the New York Herald. She fainted dead away in Sarah's arms, on catching this paragraph in the race news:

"At Coney Island yesterday, Mr. Rockfort Cheesley backed Distance Boy, odds 559 to 0. Mr. Cheesley made a clean scoop."

Opening her eyes with a gasp, Agamemna clutched both hands in her glorious hair, uncoiled the clinging, live-coal curls—showering shimmering hair pins over the Persian rug. Then she flew to the telephone, in the corner of her boudoir, and rung up New York nervous-twitchingly.

"Central, give me the Manhattan Club, please;—eh? Yes, the Manhattan—eh? No, not Mulhatton—Manhattan.

A breathless wait of four hours. Then a faint sound tickled the shell-tint ear, with the feathery dissyllable,—

"Hello!"

"Is that the Manhattan Club. Is Mr. Rockfort Cheesley there?"

"Wait,—Yes, he's in the bar room. I'll call him."

Soon came the loved-familiar voice :—

"Hello! What's up? Are you a dun?"

"Rock!"

"Dar-r-ling!"

"So you're happy at last? Distance Boy made you solid?"

"Da— *hem!* Distance Boy be blowed! Every dun in town tumbled to that lie of the World reporter, meant to make me solid with my landlady."

"S: you did not win?"

"Nary red."

"Then—*then* come to me!"

"All right; next train. Central, disconnect Jimsonweed."

Agamemna threw herself prone upon the Persian rug. Of course, huge gasps shook her frame shiverly. Equally of course, short, rending breaths rent her bosom jelly-quiverish. When she had shaken and gasped and quivered sufficiently, she rose and put back the coiling rubricity of her gore-lit locks from the marble of her mental-mantelpiece. Then she stealthily opened her writing desk and took her entire correspondence with Rye Comefret, in both her hands. This consisted of the one telegram, hereinbefore transcripted.

With hot-eyed eagerness she devoured it over and over; backwards, upside down and through the back; desperate resolve seared deep lines in that pure face;

cold determination curdled the youth upon it into cream-cheesy sallowness.

The lithe smooth arm, Rye had so often kissed darted out viciously. The telegram was in the blaze —rollicking, shriveling—crackling? As it curled black into nothingness, a cruel smile twisted the rich, ripe lips; but the nose smiled not and the eyes were as cruelly cold as woman's charity to an erring sister. Warned by the creeping heat she dropped the cinder. The fire dots died out of it, as hopes die one by one in unmated spinsters. But still she hovered over it, ever repeating, murmurous :—

"Rye! *This* divorces us!"

Backing to the door,—an awful pity freezing the words as some midnight service for the damned,—

"This *divorces* us!"

She exiled stealthily and turned the key upon the outer side. Then she dropped upon her knees and sent the hollow, blood-freezing tone through the key-hole :—

"This divorces US!"

* * * * * * *

There was a heavy tread in the hall below, as the slant sunset dyed the swart East with aniline tints, patented only in Virginia.

Handsome, hectic and with a suppressed hiccough Agamemna descended the unsteady stairs. She



DROPPING THE NO. 9 DEFTLY FROM HER FOOT, SHE CAUGHT HIM CENTRAL ON THE CURLS OF HIS FOREHEAD.—*Page 27.*

paused not at the door, but passed bravely up to the rug, where Rock stood with his hands in his pockets, firebacked with ruddy glow.

"Hug me, Rock," she said naturally.

"Wait a bit," the man answered gloomily. "I've a conundrum for you first.

"None of your wormy chestnuts," she rippled back in playful irony—"Hug me!"

He repelled her with lifted foot.—"Not yet. You are going to marry me———"

"Yes! hug me."

"With, or without a divorce——"

"*Rock!* hug me."

"Whether I win or lose; and whether Rye wins or ———"

"Hug me!"

"Not until you answer me fully——"

She broke down his guard; and with long, tentaculous arms, clung to him desperately, as he struggled and grasped:—

"No, my pantherous John L. Sullivan, not till you tell me——Nay, you *shall* answer, my beautiful Mitchell dodger!" And, with a quick heel-lock, he bent her back to the tiger-skin rug, holding her down with his knee upon her tumult-heaving bosom———

"*Now;* you will love——"

"Hug me! Hug me!"

"——Love only me; no thought of——"

"Ah, Rock! hug me!"

"——Any other man! I am as grasping as a begging Church Charity; and I'd sooner work for a living than share——"

"HUG me!"

"The half-wife of a twin husband!"

"I love you more than everybody; more than Rye,—more than myself—more than you and Rye and myself rolled into one!—*Now*—HUG ME!"

He removed his stiffening knee; took both her shelly ears in his strong hands and lifted her face to his!

* * * * * * * *

IV.

Gush—kisses—spoons—hayricks—spats—improprieties—bathos—least-said-soonest-mended; weeks of such delight as few lovers have known, and (it is hoped) few will know again.

One Tyrian dyed twilight, with the glint of paradise upon the tree tops and the indiscribable aroma of warm supper, wafting on the half-breeze that fanned her ruddy cheek, Agamemna sat in the window of her boudoir, lazily swinging her No. 9 slipper at the ash on Cheesley's cigar, glowing so cheerily below her.

He looked tenderly up at her ancles. "Lord!

How I love you!" he murmured. How can I prove it?—Look! I have loved a hundred women and have kissed them pretty promiscuously, from the bangs down. But, I never kissed a woman's foot yet. Aggy, your shoes are slipshod—but look here!"

He tiptoed and kissed one instep, then the other, osculating mumblingly, sole, heel and upper.

A wild, shuddering spasm shot cramply up her ankle-nerves, into the very arcanamous recesses of her sensitivity. It racked her strong, young limbs, until the window panes rattled and the shutters shook from their hinges. But the prideful smile never left the half-opened ripeness of her lips.

"Come off, you masher," she sighed softly; and dropping the No. 9 deftly from her foot, she caught him central on the curls of his forehead, spinning him on his back amid the lush masses of sere oats, where he sprawled, Antinously. Then he twinned octaves of their harmonious cacchination swelled to the welkin wedding bell-wise.

Just then Ajax, puffy by her run from the grocery, slid catly into the boudoir behind her mistress. Without a word, she extended a postal card, hearsy and pally with black postmarks and damp with the dews of evening, or of perspiratory touch of the ebon hands pink-shrimp-lined.

Agamemna read it at a glance. A great lump

rose in her throat, a film came before her eyes and the horizon bobbed up serenely as the tree tops spun in a dizzy waltz. With one great soundless sob, the affianced wife-bride slid from the window sill, landing plump upon the centre of her still laughing betrothed. And when Cheesley got his second wind and pulled himself together, he stooped over her as she lay. He found her silent—icy—*dead!*

* * * * * * *

Agamemna was unconscious for 29 hours and 33 minutes, On reviving, her first irrational wish was for Cheesley; and, although it was 3.19 o'clock, A. M., she insisted on staggering down to the front step, where she had embraced him on the evening of their first meeting. Her cloaky mass of cardinal hair fell through the night, like the streaky flames of a smoky kerosene lamp.

Cheesley crept up dumbly and lay, rheumatism-defiant, upon the wet, pre-dawning grass. There was a moony haze abroad that night, that lazied limply athwart the breast of the drowsy half-storm, touched into a smile by the wooing starlight. It misted itself down and veiled pally between these two, enstrangedly met.

Agamemna's face was marbled stilly. Vast waves of sursound boomed against the breakers of her cast-iron resolve, dwindling witlessly into the subsilence of her grayish brown intensity.

Thick hushedness loomed longly. Then Rock wriggled closer. He tried to lift the heavy feet he had lately kissed, and placed them upon his neck. She withdrew them solidly; then mechanical-womanly, sat upon them.

"Look here, do I bore you?" the man asked chilly, jellying into freeze by the fixed zeroism of her manner.

"Nothing bores me," she answered dead-levelly —"Nothing ever will bore me more. Here's something you must read."

"But how can I, in the dark," he said with a wan failure at a laugh, that died as the gibber of ghouls at a graveyard picnic. "Wait till morning."

"There will be no morning," she moaned voice-hollowly, fumbling in the folds of her robe-de chambre.

"My poor darling! What a shock it was!"

"You bet!" she replied, looking straight over his head at the dim distant grocery.

"My poor love! You look so cold. Give me you feet; let me hold them and warm them."

"You may hold one of them—the biggest one," she sighed dreamily. "Wait a minute till I find ——." She groped fitfully in her shoe; and finally held out to him the postal she had received.

"What is it? What *do* you mean?" he cried hoarsely.

"It is my wedding postal. You *must* read it," she ghost-sighed.

"Aggy, darling! Great lord! You've got 'em again!" "Let me call your aunt!"

She seized him by the ear as he rose, and gently but firmly put him down again; placing her foot not untenderly upon him.

"I have not the jims," she said, not unsweetly, "I'm plumb sober. This postal is from my husband —*my husband*, do you hear?—and he's won— A PILE!"

Cheesley bit his lip until the blood spirted out, high as her head and flecking her hair with congenial consanguinity. The voice was frozenly calm, but it came from behind his ears, in which he growled:

"Another chestnut!"

"It is not," she answered calmly but far-awayly, "for he tells me the name of the horse. And *you* have not married me!—You *have not* married me!"

With a mighty squirm, he turned aside her massive foot and stood erect before her. "I couldn't, Agamem! When you speak like that you break my heart!"—She neither spoke nor looked at him. Her eyes were glued to the postal card. He went on:— "Besides you haven't any divorce."

"Nor you any stamps to get me one," she answered sadly-sweetly.—"I have nothing but this postal. It is all I have;—all I have!—"



ABOVE HIS BURIED HEAD SHE MADE STRANGE SIGNALS WITH FINGERS WRIGGLY-EXPANDED AND THUMB HELD CLOSE-NOSELY.—*Page 32.*

With slow, heavy-handy grab he took the postal and read it with gloom-dazed eyes.

"What must I do?" he muttered after a hoarse pause.

"Go away, please;—anywhere," she answered cheerily. "Rye will be home for breakfast, and you know *he* wouldn't——'

With a wild cry he threw his arms about her strawberry head, crushing it vicely against his breast. "But you said you loved *me*," he moaned. "You said it – acted it!"

She lay torpid on his breast, winter snakely. No tremor touched her voice in answering:—

"I did Rock.—I *did*. But Rye was flat busted then." And once more her eyes fell to devouring the postal card.

"I'm a chump! A flip chump," the man groaned, in all the eloquence of agony—"a chump that any fly grass-widow can play for a flat and win.—No hard feelings, Aggy. This time I'm a goner for good No more telephoning; and I'll walk to the station. *Ta, ta!*"

He turned and strode away; his grand figure glooming through the mists.

Agamemna never raised her eyes from devouring the postal card. "Au revoir," she muttered, in a long-absent voice; and went on reading.

At the first fork of the path, Cheesley turned ab-

ruptly, rushed back fiercely and fell before her, wallowly. He seized both her feet, placing them on his head once more.

"Aga!" he cried grovelling—"soon you'll be flush. Say:—'I'll lend you a tenner, Rock.'"

She said it, very sweetly, as though she meant to do it:—

"I'll lend you a tenner, Rock;" but above his buried head she made strange signals, with fingers wriggly-expanded and thumb held close-nosely.

He held her feet a moment; then rose and went down the path with a flip-flap. But Agamemna was still reading the postal, when Cheesely closed the far front gate bang-slamly.

FINIS.

